Identity (social science)

In psychology, **identity** is the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person (self-identity) or group (particular social category or social group). Categorizing identity can be positive or destructive.[1]

A *psychological identity* relates to self-image (one's mental model of oneself), self-esteem, and individuality. Consequently, Weinreich gives the definition:

> "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future"; this allows for definitions of aspects of identity, such as: "One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity".[2]

Gender identity forms an important part of identity in psychology, as it dictates to a significant degree how one views oneself both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature. Other aspects of identity, such as racial, religious, ethnic, occupational… etc. may also be more or less significant – or significant in some situations but not in others (Weinreich & Saunderson 2003 pp 26–34). In cognitive psychology, the term "identity" refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self (Leary & Tangney 2003, p. 3).

Sociology places some explanatory weight on the concept of role-behavior. The notion of *identity negotiation* may arise from the learning of social roles through personal experience. Identity negotiation is a process in which a person negotiates with society at large regarding the meaning of their identity

Psychologists most commonly use the term "identity" to describe *personal identity*, or the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique. Sociologists, however, often use the term to describe *social identity*, or the collection of group memberships that define the individual. However, these uses are not proprietary and each discipline may use either concept and each discipline may combine both concepts when considering a person's identity

The description or representation of individual and group identity is a central task for psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists and those of other disciplines where "identity" needs to be mapped and defined. How should one describe the identity of another, in ways which encompass both their idiosyncratic qualities and their group memberships or identifications, both of which can shift according to circumstance? Following on from the work of Kelly, Erikson, Tajfel and others, Weinreich's Identity Structure Analysis (ISA), is "a structural representation of the individual's existential experience, in which the relationships between self and other agents are organised in relatively stable structures over time … with the emphasis on the socio-cultural milieu in which self relates to other agents and institutions" (Weinreich and Saunderson, (eds) 2003, p1). Using constructs drawn from the salient discourses of the individual, the group and cultural norms, the practical operationalisation of ISA provides a methodology that maps how these are used by the individual, applied across time and milieus by the "situated self" to appraise self and other agents and institutions (for example, resulting in the individual's evaluation of self and significant others and institutions).

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In psychology

Erik Erikson (1902–1994) became one of the earliest psychologists to take an explicit interest in identity. The Eriksonian framework rests upon a distinction among the psychological sense of continuity, known as the *ego identity* (sometimes identified simply as "the self"); the personal idiosyncrasies that separate one person from the next, known as the *personal identity*; and the collection of social roles that a person might play, known as either the *social identity* or the *cultural identity*. Erikson's work, in the psychodynamic tradition, aimed to investigate the process of identity formation across a lifespan. Progressive strength in the ego identity, for example, can be charted in terms of a series of stages in which identity is formed in response to increasingly sophisticated challenges. The process of forming a viable sense of identity for the culture is conceptualized as an adolescent task, and those who do not manage a resynthesis of childhood identifications are seen as being in a state of 'identity diffusion' whereas those who retain their initially given identities unquestioned have 'foreclosed' identities (Weinreich & Saunderson 2003 p7-8). On some readings of Erikson, the development of a strong ego identity along with the proper integration into a stable society and culture, lead to a stronger sense of identity in general. Accordingly, a deficiency in either of these factors may increase the chance of an identity crisis or confusion (Cote & Levine 2002, p. 22).

Although the self is distinct from identity, the literature of self-psychology can offer some insight into how identity is maintained (Cote & Levine 2002, p. 24). From the vantage point of self-psychology, there are two areas of interest: the processes by which a self is formed (the "I"), and the actual content of the schemata which compose the self-concept (the "Me"). In the latter field, theorists have shown interest in relating the self-concept to self-esteem, the differences between complex and simple ways of organizing self-knowledge, and the links between those organizing principles and the processing of information (Cote & Levine 2002).

The "Neo-Eriksonian" *identity status* paradigm emerged in later years, driven largely by the work of James Marcia. This paradigm focuses upon the twin concepts of *exploration* and *commitment*. The central idea is that any individual's sense of identity is determined in large part by the explorations and commitments that he or she makes regarding certain personal and social traits. It follows that the core of the research in this paradigm investigates the degrees to which a person has made certain explorations, and the degree to which he or she displays a commitment to those explorations.

A person may display either relative weakness or relative strength in terms of both exploration and commitments. When assigned categories, four possible permutations result: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement. Diffusion is when a person lacks both exploration in life and interest in committing even to those unchosen roles that he or she occupies. Foreclosure is when a person has not chosen extensively in the past, but seems willing to commit to some relevant values, goals, or roles in the future. Moratorium is when a person displays a kind of flightiness, ready to make choices but unable to commit to them. Finally, achievement is when a person makes identity choices and commits to them.

Weinreich's identity variant similarly includes the categories of identity diffusion, foreclosure and crisis, but with a somewhat different emphasis. Here, with respect to identity diffusion for example, an optimal level is interpreted as the norm, as it is unrealistic to expect an individual to resolve all their conflicted identifications with others; therefore we should be alert to individuals with level which are much higher or lower than the norm – highly diffused individuals are classified as diffused, and those with low levels as foreclosed or defensive. (Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003, pp 65–67; 105–106). Weinreich applies the identity variant in a framework which also allows for the transition from one to another by way of biographical experiences and resolution of conflicted

identifications situated in various contexts – for example, an adolescent going through family break-up may be in one state, whereas later in a stable marriage with a secure professional role may be in another. Hence, though there is continuity, there is also development and change. (Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003, pp 22–23).

Laing's definition of identity closely follows Erikson's, in emphasising the past, present and future components of the experienced self. He also develops the concept of the "metaperspective of self", i.e. the self's perception of the other's view of self, which has been found to be extremely important in clinical contexts such as anorexia nervosa. (Saunderson and O'Kane, 2005). Harré also conceptualises components of self/identity – the "person" (the unique being I am to myself and others) along with aspects of self (including a totality of attributes including beliefs about one's characteristics including life history), and the personal characteristics displayed to others.

In social psychology

At a general level, self-psychology is compelled to investigate the question of how the personal self relates to the social environment. To the extent that these theories place themselves in the tradition of "psychological" social psychology, they focus on explaining an individual's actions within a group in terms of mental events and states. However, some "sociological" social psychology theories go further by attempting to deal with the issue of identity at both the levels of individual cognition and of collective behavior

Collective identity

Many people gain a sense of positive self-esteem from their identity groups, which furthers a sense of community and belonging. Another issue that researchers have attempted to address is the question of why people engage in discrimination, i.e., why they tend to favor those they consider a part of their "in-group" over those considered to be outsiders. Both questions have been given extensiv attention by researchers working in the social identity tradition. For example, in work relating to social identity theory it has been shown that merely crafting cognitive distinction between in- and out-groups can lead to subtle effects on people's evaluations of others (Cote & Levine 2002).[3]

Different social situations also compel people to attach themselves to different self-identities which may cause some to feel marginalized, switch between different groups and self-identifications,[4] or reinterpret certain identity components.[5] These different selves lead to constructed images dichotomized between what people want to be (the ideal self) and how others see them (the limited self). Educational background and Occupational status and roles significantly influence identity formation in this regard.[6]

Identity formation strategies

Another issue of interest in social psychology is related to the notion that there are certain *identity formation strategies* which a person may use to adapt to the social world. (Cote & Levine 2002, pp. 3–5) developed a typology which investigated the different manners of behavior that individuals may have. (3) Their typology includes:

	Psychological symptoms	Personality symptoms	Social symptoms
Refuser	Develops cognitive blocks that prevent adoption of adult role-schemas	Engages in childlike behavior	Shows extensive dependency upon others and no meaningful engagement with the community of adults
Drifter	Possesses greater psychological resources than the Refuser (i.e., intelligence, charisma)	Is apathetic toward application of psychological resources	Has no meaningful engagement with or commitment to adult communities
Searcher	Has a sense of dissatisfaction due to high personal and social expectations	Shows disdain for imperfections within the community	Interacts to some degree with role-models, but ultimately these relationships are abandoned
Guardian	Possesses clear personal values and attitudes, but also a deep fear of change	Sense of personal identity is almost exhausted by sense of social identity	Has an extremely rigid sense of social identity and strong identification with adult communities
Resolver	Consciously desires self-growth	Accepts personal skills and competencies and uses them actively	Is responsive to communities that provide opportunity for self-growth

Kenneth Gergen formulated additional classifications, which include the *strategic manipulator*, the *pastiche personality*, and the *relational self*. The strategic manipulator is a person who begins to regard all senses of identity merely as role-playing exercises, and who gradually becomes alienated from his or her social "self". The pastiche personality abandons all aspirations toward a true or "essential" identity, instead viewing social interactions as opportunities to play out, and hence become, the roles they play. Finally, the relational self is a perspective by which persons abandon all sense of exclusive self, and view all sense of identity in terms of social engagement with others. For Gergen, these strategies follow one another in phases, and they are linked to the increase in popularity of postmodern culture and the rise of telecommunications technology.

In social anthropology

Anthropologists have most frequently employed the term 'identity' to refer to this idea of selfhood in a loosely Eriksonian way (Erikson 1972) properties based on the uniqueness and individuality which makes a person distinct from others. Identity became of more interest to anthropologists with the emergence of modern concerns with ethnicity and social movements in the 1970s. This was reinforced by an appreciation, following the trend in sociological thought, of the manner in which the individual is affected by and contributes to the overall social context. At the same time, the Eriksonian approach to identity remained in force, with the result that identity has continued until recently to be used in a largely socio-historical way to refer to qualities of sameness in relation to a person's connection to others and to a particular group of people.

The first favours a primordialist approach which takes the sense of self and belonging to a collective group as a fixed thing, defined by objective criteria such as common ancestry and common biological characteristics. The second, rooted in social constructionist theory, takes the view that identity is formed by a predominantly political choice of certain characteristics. In so doing, it questions the idea that identity is a natural given, characterised by fixed, supposedly objective criteria. Both approaches need to be understood in their respective political and historical contexts, characterised by debate on issues of class, race and ethnicity. While they have been criticized, they continue to exert an influence on approaches to the conceptualisation of identity today.

These different explorations of 'identity' demonstrate how difficult a concept it is to pin down. Since identity is a virtual thing, it is impossible to define it empirically. Discussions of identity use the term with different meanings, from fundamental and abiding sameness, to fluidity, contingency, negotiated and so on. Brubaker and Cooper note a tendency in many scholars to confuse identity as a category of practice and as a category of analysis (Brubaker & Cooper 2000, p. 5). Indeed, many scholars demonstrate a tendency to follow their own preconceptions of identity, following more or less the frameworks listed above, rather than taking into account the mechanisms by which the concept is crystallised as reality. In this environment, some analysts, such as Brubaker and Cooper, have suggested doing away with the concept completely (Brubaker & Cooper 2000, p. 1). Others, by contrast, have sought to introduce alternative concepts in an attempt to capture the dynamic and fluid qualities of human social self-expression. Hall (1992, 1996), for example, suggests treating identity as a process, to take into account the reality of diverse and ever-changing social experience. Some scholars have introduced the idea of identification, whereby identity is perceived as made up of different

components that are 'identified' and interpreted by individuals. The construction of an individual sense of self is achieved by personal choices regarding who and what to associate with. Such approaches are liberating in their recognition of the role of the individual in social interaction and the construction of identity

Anthropologists have contributed to the debate by shifting the focus of research: One of the first challenges for the researcher wishin to carry out empirical research in this area is to identify an appropriate analytical tool. The concept of boundaries is useful here for demonstrating how identity works. In the same way as Barth, in his approach to ethnicity, advocated the critical focus for investigation as being "the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1969:15), social anthropologists such as Cohen and Bray have shifted the focus of analytical study from identity to the boundaries that are used for purposes of identification. If identity is a kind of virtual site in which the dynamic processes and markers used for identification are made apparent, boundaries provide the framework on which this virtual site is built. They concentrated on how the idea of community belonging is differently constructed by individual members and how individuals within the group conceive ethnic boundaries.

As a non-directive and flexible analytical tool, the concept of boundaries helps both to map and to define the changeability and mutability that are characteristic of people's experiences of the self in society. While identity is a volatile, flexible and abstract 'thing', its manifestations and the ways in which it is exercised are often open to view. Identity is made evident through the use of markers such as language, dress, behaviour and choice of space, whose effect depends on their recognition by other social beings. Markers help to create the boundaries that define similarities or differences between the marker wearer and the marker perceivers, their effectiveness depends on a shared understanding of their meaning. In a social context, misunderstandings can arise due to a misinterpretation of the significance of specific markers. Equally, an individual can use markers of identity to exert influence on other people without necessarily fulfilling all the criteria that an external observer might typically associate with such an abstract identity.

Boundaries can be inclusive or exclusive depending on how they are perceived by other people. An exclusive boundary arises, for example, when a person adopts a marker that imposes restrictions on the behaviour of others. An inclusive boundary is created, by contrast, by the use of a marker with which other people are ready and able to associate. At the same time, however, an inclusive boundary will also impose restrictions on the people it has included by limiting their inclusion within other boundaries. An example of this is the use of a particular language by a newcomer in a room full of people speaking various languages. Some people may understand the language used by this person while others may not. Those who do not understand it might take the newcomer's use of this particular language merely as a neutral sign of identity. But they might also perceive it as imposing an exclusive boundary that is meant to mark them off from her. On the other hand, those who do understand the newcomer's language could take it as an inclusive boundary, through which the newcomer associates herself with them to the exclusion of the other people present. Equally, however, it is possible that people who do understand the newcomer but who also speak another language may not want to speak the newcomer's language and so see her marker as an imposition and a negative boundary. It is possible that the newcomer is either aware or unaware of this, depending on whether she herself knows other languages or is conscious of the plurilingual quality of the people there and is respectful of it or not.

In philosophy

Hegel rejects Cartesian philosophy, supposing that we do not always doubt and that we do not always have consciousness. In his famous Master-Slave Dialectic Hegel attempts to show that the mind (*Geist*) only become conscious when it encounters another mind. One Geist attempts to control the other, since up until that point it has only encountered tools for its use. A struggle for domination ensues, leading to Lordship and Bondage.

Nietzsche, who was influenced by Hegel in some ways but rejected him in others, called for a rejection of "Soul Atomism" in The Gay Science. Nietzsche supposed that the Soul was an interaction of forces, an ever-changing thing far from the immortal soul posited by both Descartes and the Christian tradition. His "Construction of the Soul" in many ways resembles modern social constructivism.

Heidegger, following Nietzsche, did work on identity. For Heidegger, people only really form an identity after facing death. It's death that allows people to choose from the social constructed meanings in their world, and assemble a finite identity out of seemingly infinite meanings. For Heidegger, most people never escape the "they", a socially constructed identity of "how one ought to be" created mostly to try to escape death through ambiguity

Many philosophical schools derive from rejecting Hegel, and diverse traditions of acceptance and rejection have developed.

Ricoeur has introduced the distinction between the ipse identity (selfhood, 'who am I?') and the idem identity (sameness, or a third-person perspective which objectifies identity) (Ricoeur & Blamey 1995).

Implications

The implications are multiple as various research traditions are now heavily utilizing the lens of identity to examine phenomena. One implication of identity and of identity construction can be seen in occupational settings. This becomes increasing challenging in stigmatized jobs or "dirty work" (Hughes, 1951). Tracy and Trethewey (2005) state that "individuals gravitate toward and turn away from particular jobs depending in part, on the extent to which they validate a "preferred organizational self" (Tracy & Tretheway 2005, p. 169). Some jobs carry different stigmas or acclaims. In her analysis Tracy uses the example of correctional officers trying to shake the stigma of "glorified maids" (Tracy & Tretheway 2005). "The process by which people arrive at justifications of and values for various occupational choices." Among these are workplace satisfaction and overall quality of life (Tracy & Scott 2006, p. 33). People in these types of jobs are forced to find ways in order to create an identity they can live with. "Crafting a positive sense of self at work is more challenging when one's work is considered "dirty" by societal standards" (Tracy & Scott 2006, p. 7). "In other words, doing taint management is not just about allowing the employee to feel good in that job. "If employees must navigate discourses that question the viability of their work, and/ or experience obstacles in managing taint through transforming dirty work into a badge of honor, it is likely they will find blaming the client to be an efficacious route in affirming their identity" (Tracy & Scott 2006, p. 33).

In any case, the concept that an individual has a unique identity developed relatively recently in history. Factors influencing the emphasis on personal identity may include:

- in the West, the Protestant stress on one's responsibility for one's own soul
- psychology itself, emerging as a distinct field of knowledge and study from the 19th century onwards
- the growth of a sense of privacy since the Renaissance
- specialization of worker roles during the industrial period (as opposed, for example, to the undifferentiated roles of peasants in the feudal system)
- occupation and employment's effect on identity
- increased emphasis on gender identity, including gender dysphoria and transgender issues

Identity changes

An important implication relates to identity change, i.e. the transformation of identity

Contexts include:

- radical career-change (Ibarra 2003)
- gender identity transition
- national
- The practice of adoption

See also

- Gender dysphoria
- Identity formation
- Identity politics
- International Identity Federation
- Otium

- Online identity
- Role engulfment
- Self and Identity
- Self-concept
- Self-consciousness
- Self-discovery
- Self-schema
- Self-knowledge
- Spoiled identity
- Species dysphoria

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